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Why it is Harmful to Depict a Worldview as Glasses¹

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There is a widely employed metaphor for depicting the nature and function of a worldview: We should understand it as a set of glasses. Unfortunately, no matter how ubiquitous this metaphor is, especially among Evangelicals, it is not only false, but extremely harmful.² To support my claim, I will focus on an example of the glasses perspective and show why it is wrong and harmful. My example is Michael Wittmer's book *Heaven is a Place on Earth* (Zondervan, 2004). Now, I am not interested in picking at nits. But there is a serious problem with Wittmer's first chapter that is contrary to common sense realism and undermines our ability to be in contact with the external world via our senses or to experience God and His voice. And, I believe, it is inconsistent with scriptural teaching. If I am right about this, then there is much of importance to learn by focusing on Wittmer's position.

It is important to realize that the task of analyzing and presenting a careful, adequate account of a worldview is largely a philosophical, not a biblical or theological, task. Specifically, epistemology and philosophical theories of perception are front and center for this task. In what follows, I shall briefly sketch Wittmer's fairly typical views, and offer a response that undermines his position and is more consistent with common sense realism, the nature of knowledge, and biblical teaching.

Fundamental to understanding my critique is recognizing that all "perceptual" knowing (whether employing the five senses or involving direct, intuitive awareness of something beyond the senses, e.g., being directly aware of God) is not reducible to "seeing as" or "seeing that." One can see the world, for example, as a Christian or see that the world is made by a good God. One can see

¹ An earlier version of this essay was originally published at KingdomRain.net (August 2006). The original essay was occasioned by thinking about Wittmer's book as an overall contribution to Vineyard theological thinking and practices. Of course, Wittmer's theological contributions are not just valuable among Vineyard leaders.

² While this essay is focused on Wittmer, the problems I surface are not unique to Wittmer. Other Christian philosophers, apologists and theologians knowingly or inadvertently seek to explain an account of worldview using the language and concepts of worldview-as-'glasses', 'lens', 'spectacles', or 'conceptual scheme' *through* which we know reality [e.g., Ronald Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict* (Zondervan Academic, 1992), 17-18; James Anderson, *What's Your Worldview?* (Crossway, 2014), 13, 103; Tawa Anderson, W. Michael Clark, David Naugle, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (IVP Academic, 2017), 8, 12, 328].

an object as an apple or see that it is an apple. The quality of such seeing is enriched by possessing various concepts or propositional contents. But it does *not* follow that “seeing as” or “seeing that” are the *only* available ways to see or to account for one’s seeing. More fundamental is a “simple seeing”: having “knowledge by acquaintance”, a seeing that directly experiences an object present to one’s consciousness. Thus, a child may directly experience an apple prior to being able to see it as an apple or to judge that it is an apple. Indeed, these later forms of seeing are actually possible and justified by the prior act of simply seeing the apple in a non-conceptual, non-propositional way.

We experience knowledge by acquaintance in a variety of ways: with an apple through visual experience, with my anger through introspection, with God, demons, or angels through spiritual perception. Did Abraham only have “seeing as” or “seeing that” in his encounter with the angel of the LORD just as he was about to sacrifice Isaac? Or what of Moses and Pharaoh? Did they only see plagues and the mighty works of God – the parting of the Red Sea! – because they shared a “similar enough” conceptual lens to see? When Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, or John at Patmos had vivid dreams and visions, often filled with rich symbols and allusions, was it all “interpretation” and no direct encounter with the phenomenon itself? How did Job experience a shift in his worldview if he did not have direct experience with the presence of God? Was it only about shifting presuppositions; no “independent” basis, reliably encountering divine revelation directly? How did Job know that he needed a different interpretation of his suffering if not by gaining a perspective independent of what was “on loan” from his worldview?

1. Wittmer on Worldviews, Glasses, Presuppositions and Experience

Wittmer claims that a “worldview comprises the lens *through which* we see the world” [*italics mine*] (p. 21), and he compares a worldview with glasses, specifically, contact lens. Second, he holds that a worldview has a set of central, fundamental beliefs, which he calls ultimate *commitments* (notice the use of volitional language in “commitments” and not cognitive language in describing ultimate commitments; more on this later) or presuppositions (p. 25). He tells us that these lie at the very center of our worldview and illustrates what this means by the following (p. 26): If you believe P on the basis of Q and Q on the basis of R, and so on, eventually you reach some ultimate presupposition Z about which you say, “I don’t know why I believe Z, I just do.” This is your ultimate “faith commitment,” your “most basic presupposition,” your “starting point.” Wittmer summarizes: “As a starting point, your presupposition is a belief you argue *from*, not *to*. It is not a destination but a place to begin.”

As we will see, two disastrous things follow from all this: (1) There is no place given to the role of direct contact with/experiences of reality (including

God); indeed, on this view, one is trapped behind one's worldview. (Remember, it is a set of glasses *through which* we see, i.e., our worldview is between me and reality such that I never experience reality itself. I am trapped behind my worldview). This implication of Wittmer's position does not entail that there is not an external world "out there" or that we somehow construct reality itself. But from the time of Kant to the present, views like Wittmer's do imply that it is a moot point as to whether or not there is a real external world. Why? Because on that view no one has any access to a mind-independent world, so whatever is "out there" is irrelevant to our lives and thinking.

(2) The act of acquiring your basic presuppositions is a choice, in fact, an arbitrary choice for no reason whatsoever. It is here that the mere volitional, non-cognitive nature of "selecting" one's basic principles becomes a problem. Why? There is, in principle, nothing further back of basic presuppositions in light of which alternative sets could be rationally appraised. So, adopting one set of presuppositions (and the worldview that follows) is utterly arbitrary and bereft of any cognitive considerations. As a result, it is hard to see how one could support the claim that people should adopt one's presuppositions or worldview because it is more reasonable than alternatives in making sense of the world.

I suggest that, to the contrary, there is a test for ultimate worldview presuppositions, and that is direct experience of reality in which we compare our presuppositions to reality itself. But if Wittmer is correct, in so far as worldviews are grounded in fundamental presuppositions/arbitrary commitments, worldviews are, in principle, arational or, more likely, irrational. Wittmer may well employ reasoning *within* one's worldview, but that is beside the point. When it comes to adopting a worldview itself, along with the relevant set of presuppositions, rational factors are otiose.

Wittmer goes on to say that in addition to serving as a lens through which we see the world, our ultimate worldview presuppositions "*determine* how we interpret reality," they "*mediate* experiences of the world," their role implies that "where we start *determines* where we end up," and "our experiences do not come self-interpreted" [*italics mine*]. Thus, "all interpretations [*worldviews*] are rationally equal." [*italics mine*] (all on p. 27).

His statement that "same event, different interpretations" (p. 28) is precisely the sort of relativistic, arbitrary nature of a choice of interpretations of, say, an answered prayer or a biblical text that follows from the worldview-as-glasses view. How could anyone ever know these things if one's interpretation of the relevant item has nothing to do with a direct experience of reality itself but, rather, "experience" is entirely *determined* by one's interpretation? If that were the case, why would God reveal "truth" in the Bible? It's one thing to say that a particular text is difficult to interpret. It's another thing altogether to say that one's

interpretations are determined by factors (one's assumptions) that have nothing to do with God's revelation in the first place.

In the glasses view, there just is no such thing as a book of Romans or, if there is, it is irrelevant because no one has any access to it whatsoever. Instead, we have access only to our constructed book of Romans, to a text as constituted by the worldview glasses we wear. In this way, the actual book of Romans "out there," becomes a Kantian thing-in-itself, forever beyond our reach. All that we have access to is the Kantian thing-too-us, that is, the "text(s)" constructed by the constituting activity of our worldview glasses. Thus, there is a Catholic, an Evangelical, an LGBTQ, a Marxist book of Romans, each being constituted by the deterministic constructive function of one's glasses. According to Wittmer, "One religion's miracle is explained away by another [religion]" (p. 28). Do we really want Heidi and Roland Baker (who have credible healing ministries among the poor in Africa) to think this way about what folk in a crowd of Muslims and Christians should conclude from a set of healings in an evangelistic crusade? I think not. And, as just noted, the same problem of arbitrariness would be present in attempts to interpret the Bible.

From pages 29-31, Wittmer tries in vain to reinstate the role of experience in changing one's worldview. And he is finally heading in the right direction. But the damage has already been done. The role he wants experience to play in these pages cannot be satisfied in light of his previous claims. Let's see why. But first, here's a summary of Wittmer's glasses-view of a worldview.

(1) One's ultimate presuppositions are arbitrary faith commitments that have to be chosen. All argument is from them. Nothing can be used to argue for or provide rational support for them. Things that happen in the world are religiously ambiguous. Many interpretations can equally "explain" the facts, so a choice of interpretation is just that: an arbitrary choice.

(2) There is no knowledge by acquaintance, no direct experience of or contact with reality. Instead, our worldview presuppositions determine what we see, we see things through our worldview, it stands between us and reality.

2. Response: Can We Really See Things?

In II Corinthians 10:3-5, Paul describes the core of spiritual warfare as a struggle of ideas, a conflict of worldviews: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses... We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God [NASB]." Note carefully, that we are to destroy fortresses—speculations, theories, patterns of ideas—raised up against the *knowledge* of God. Such a task involves reasoning, argumentation, and an ability to directly experience God, His voice, and

His actions, along with angels and demons (Isn't the gift of discernment the ability to have knowledge by acquaintance with a demon, that is, to be directly aware of a demon's presence irrespective of one's worldview?). In turn, this requires the ability to think about worldviews.

A person's worldview contains two important features. First, it includes the set of beliefs the person accepts, especially those about important matters such as reality, God, value, knowledge and so on. But a worldview isn't just a set of beliefs. To see this, consider this sentence, "The best time to visit Disneyland is in the fall during the week." It is not just a list of thirteen words. Rather, it is a unity of words whose unity consists in the grammatical structure that obtains among them. Similarly, a worldview includes the rational structure that obtains among the set of beliefs that constitute it. Some beliefs are central and basic, while others are relatively peripheral.

In general, the more central a belief is, the greater would be the change in one's worldview if the belief were abandoned. Central beliefs support and give justification to more peripheral ones. Belief in the reality of God, the inerrancy of the Bible, the deity and humanity of Christ are central to a Christian worldview. Less central are beliefs about local church structure, the nature of spiritual gifts, and so on. In understanding a worldview, it is important to grasp the relevant set of ideas along with the various support relations that obtain among them.

While a worldview affects what one sees, it is a mistake to compare a worldview with a set of glasses such that (1) the worldview stands between us and reality and we see *through* it and (2) knowledge by acquaintance with or direct awareness of reality does not take place. Glasses stand between a person and the external world such that a person's access to reality is mediated *through* the glasses. One does not have direct access to reality itself.

However, it is dangerously wrong to hold a view that places things between knowing and experiencing subjects and the real world – things like one's cultural, historical location, one's tradition, gender, race, or worldview – such that these items block our direct access to reality. It could be argued that our finitude does precisely this, namely, finitude entails that we have only mediated access to reality. But this claim represents a confusion and a misrepresentation of the view under consideration. Regarding the confusion, it conflates having genuine, direct though limited access to reality with failing to have direct access to reality. (e.g., I actually see the front side of an apple even if I can't see the back side).

Regarding the misrepresentation, one could claim that glasses can mediate our access to the world by improving that access, so glasses do not necessarily cut us off from reality. But for at least two reasons, it should be obvious that this is not the view I am criticizing. For one thing, associated assertions above that cluster around the notion that there is no access to uninterpreted facts, shows that a worldview-as-glasses does not function to mediate more accurately an awareness

of reality (uninterpreted facts themselves). Rather, a worldview-as-glasses presents the subject with “interpreted (i.e., constituted things-to-me and not things-in-themselves) facts. For another thing, if glasses mediate the world in such a way that they give us an improved access to reality, how could we ever know such a claim was true? It seems to me that such knowledge would require a glasses-independent access to reality to be able to judge if the glasses were helping or hindering that access by comparing our awareness of objects with the glasses on with an awareness without the glasses on to make that judgment.

The answer cannot be that we know these things by special revelation, because all the problems of awareness of reality are present in attempts to be aware of special revelation. Nor can the answer be that the Holy Spirit illuminates the meaning of special revelation to us because any experience of illumination would itself be constituted by an interpretation of the experience and, moreover, we would have to have direct access to special revelation to know that we can expect the Spirit to provide such illumination. And both moves are self-defeating.

One troublesome implication of such a model is that people can never correct their beliefs by comparing them by direct experience to things themselves. Yet people, including little children, do this all the time. A better way to describe the role of a worldview in seeing reality is to depict it as a habituated way of directing our attention or inattention as the case may be. It is the difference between ‘thinking with’ a worldview vs. ‘thinking through’ a worldview.

Let me explain. One day a missionary spoke in the seminary chapel, and without telling us where they were taken, he showed a set of slides from a culture he had visited. He asked us to list on paper everything we saw. After we were finished, he spoke a while, and then put the slides up again and asked us to start with a fresh sheet of paper and list everything we saw this time. Interestingly, people’s second list was virtually identical to their first one. Why? Because people tend to look to confirm what they already see and believe rather than adopt a fresh perspective and launch out from scratch. Over time, people fall into ruts and adopt ways of seeing things according to which certain features are noticed and others are neglected.

I’m not claiming this is a good or bad thing. I’m simply noting that it happens. I suggest that a worldview functions as a set of habit-forming background beliefs that direct our acts of noticing or failing to notice various features of reality. Depending on various factors, this worldview function may yield accurate or inaccurate experiences and beliefs. It’s not that we cannot see reality itself. In fact, through effort we can look at things from a different perspective and further confirm or disconfirm our previous viewpoint. Habit-forming beliefs do not stand between a person and reality as do glasses. Rather, they habitualize ways of seeing and thinking which, through effort, can be changed or retained, hopefully on the basis of comparing them with reality itself.

To probe Wittmer's views further, we need to get clear about three kinds of knowledge³:

1. **Knowledge by acquaintance:** This happens when we are directly aware of something, e.g., when I see an apple directly before me or pay attention to my inner feelings, I know these things by acquaintance. One does not need a concept of an apple or knowledge of how to use the word "apple" in English to have knowledge by acquaintance with an apple. A baby can see an apple without having the relevant concept or linguistic skills. *Knowledge by acquaintance is sometimes called "simple seeing," being directly aware of something.*
2. **Propositional knowledge:** This is knowledge that an entire proposition is true. For example, knowledge that "the object there is an apple" requires having a concept of an apple and knowing that the object under consideration satisfies the concept. ***Propositional knowledge is justified true belief, it is believing something that is true on the basis of adequate grounds.***
3. **Know-how:** *This is the ability to do certain things*, e.g., to use apples for certain purposes. We may distinguish mere know-how from genuine know-how or skill. The latter is know-how based on knowledge and insight and is characteristic of skilled-practitioners in some field. Mere know-how is the ability to engage in the correct behavioral movements, say by following the steps in a manual, with little or no knowledge of why one is performing these movements.

Because this is so important, let me elaborate on these three kinds of knowledge: knowledge by acquaintance, propositional knowledge and know-how. The first sort of knowledge is knowledge by simple seeing—when one is directly aware, directly experiences something. One can think of a tree, God, or whether or not one is angry, but these are all different from directly being aware of the tree, God, or one's inner state of anger. Knowledge by acquaintance is an important foundation for all knowledge, and in an important sense, experience or direct awareness of reality is the basis for everything we know. One can be directly aware of something without having a concept of it or knowing the word for it. Thus, a child can be aware of an apple without being able to see it as an apple, without having a concept yet of an apple and without having acquired the word

³ For more development of the issues in this section see my *Kingdom Triangle* (Zondervan, 2007), chapter 5.

“apple.” *Experience is more basic than ultimate worldview presuppositions and, in fact, the evidence of experience provides data for adjudicating rival worldviews or interpretations of some event.*

One should not limit what one can see or directly be aware of to the five senses. One can also be directly aware of one’s own souls and inner states of thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs and so forth by introspective awareness of one’s inner life. One can be directly aware of God, of His speaking to one in guidance, of the Spirit’s testimony to various things, and so forth. From Plato to the present, many philosophers have believed, correctly in my view, in what is called *rational awareness*, the soul’s ability to directly be aware of aesthetic and moral values, numbers and the laws of mathematics, the laws of logic, and various abstract objects such as humanness, wisdom and so forth. *The important thing to note is that we humans have the power to “see,” to be directly aware of, to directly experience a wide range of things, many of which are not subject to sensory awareness with the five senses.* This is what Wittmer omits and he needs this to prevent worldview choice from becoming arbitrary.

To see an apple is to be directly aware of it (this is called *simple seeing*). To *see something as* an apple requires that one has acquired the concept of being an apple (perhaps from repeated exposure to simply seeing apples) and applies it to the object before one. To *see that* an object is an apple, one must have the entire thought in one’s mind “The object before me is an apple” and to judge that the object truly satisfies that thought.

Given the reality and nature of knowledge by acquaintance, it follows that knowledge does not begin with presuppositions, language, concepts, one’s cultural standpoint or anything else. It starts with awareness of reality. *Seeing as* and *seeing that* do require that one has presuppositions, concepts, and so forth. One’s worldview will **INFLUENCE** how we see thing *as such and such*, e.g., as a healing from God, and one’s worldview will *influence* our *seeing that* or *judging that such and such*, e.g., seeing/judging that this event is a miraculous healing. But one’s worldview does not *determine* the way we see or judge things. That’s far too strong. Influence is one thing, determination is another. And because we have direct acquaintance with the world itself (i.e., simple seeing) prior to seeing as or seeing that, we can compare the way we see things or judge things with the things themselves and thereby we alter or adjust our worldview.

For example, because we actually see the person get well, we can verify or disconfirm that we are right to see the event as or judge that it was a miracle from God. Indeed, it is because there is such a thing as knowledge by acquaintance that we regularly experience times in which we can compare our concepts or thoughts about something with the thing itself as it is in reality, and thereby correct or confirm our thoughts by comparing them with the things themselves. Knowledge by acquaintance gives us direct access to reality as it is in itself, and we actually

know this to be the case in our daily lives. To see this, consider the following examples offered by philosopher Scott Smith which, because of their richness and practical importance, I quote from a couple of his examples:

1. *How a toddler learns to identify an apple.* I have enjoyed watching my two-year-old daughter develop her understanding of what apples are. When she was quite young, my wife and I would show her a book that helped her learn what different fruits look like. There are about twenty-four pictures of Red Delicious apples, oranges, grapes, and bananas on two adjacent pages. We would start by pointing to a picture of an apple on the left page, and we would then say “apple.” Then we would point to another apple picture and say “apple” again. We would repeat this through all the apple pictures, as well as the oranges and so on. Later, we would return to this book and ask her, “Where are the apples?” She would point to one, and we would affirm her by saying “good!” Then I might ask, “Where is another apple?” As she has grown older, she has developed the ability to identify all the other apples pictured there. She also would get to see different apples we would eat at home, not all of which were Red Delicious.

What was going on? She had to see each apple picture for *what it is*, hear the word “apple” uttered for *what it is*, learn to associate the apple’s picture with the word “apple,” and then develop a concept (presupposition, belief)⁴ of what an apple is from many observations. She then could go into the grocery store’s produce section and be able to pick out as apples not just Red Delicious ones, but also Gala, Golden Delicious, Fuji, and more . . .⁵

2. *The example of reading a text aloud.* Suppose you are reading a passage of Scripture aloud in your church’s worship service, and your passage is Romans 1:16,17 (NASB): “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the love of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’” Suppose you read the passage just like that. Now, you may notice that some people look up at you with a puzzled look on their faces. You might start to wonder why. Then, maybe someone pulls you aside and, to your surprise, tells you that you read it wrong, that you substituted “love” for “righteousness” in the last verse.

⁴ Parenthetical comments are mine.

⁵ R. Scott Smith, “Post-conservatives, Foundationalism, and Theological Truth: A Critical Evaluation,” *JETS* 48:2 (June 2005): 359. Scott quotes additional examples in his article.

How would people present know whether what you read was right or not? Somehow, they have to hear the sounds you uttered for what they are, see what the word in the passage actually is, compare the two, and then express their thoughts properly in language (e.g., “you misspoke,” not “great job!”). I did this intentionally in a philosophy class one day, to see how attentively my students were following my reading, and to force them to pay attention to their awarenesses - what they heard, what they read, their comparison of the two, and their judgment. How could we ever correct anyone if we do not have access to these things as they really are, and that we can each see what is indeed the case?

What should we make of these case studies? In each case, we have to be able to see a thing for what it is. From many noticings, we develop a concept of what that thing is. We also must see that a particular object of our awareness is another instance of that kind of thing (perhaps a Golden Delicious apple). We learn to associate a term with our awareness of the object by hearing the term for what it is, seeing the object for what it is, and then comparing them and seeing that, yes, this object is indeed that kind of thing. That is, we can see that an object of our awareness fulfills the concept, and then we can see that the thing in question is indeed such-and-such.⁶

I have belabored the point about the reality of knowledge by acquaintance because it is so widely and prematurely dismissed today, and yet, it is of such crucial importance for the Christian life. Among other things, such knowledge places us in direct contact with God, physical and spiritual reality, our own souls, and a host of other things. Knowledge by acquaintance is not infallible—we can be distorted, blurred, and so on, due to our finiteness and fallenness—but it is available. By way of application, it would be a useful exercise to think through how knowledge by acquaintance is essential to learning to hear God’s voice on a daily basis within the boundaries set by Holy Scripture.

The other two forms of knowledge require only a brief comment. Propositional knowledge consists in a true belief based on adequate justification or grounds. If I know that it is raining outside, I must believe it is raining, that belief must be true, and I must have adequate grounds for the belief. Remember, propositional knowledge does not require certainty, so that one’s grounds for a belief that, say, it is raining or that God is leading me to do such and such, or that abortion is wrong do not need to make the belief absolutely certain. Moreover, what counts as adequate grounds will vary from circumstance to circumstance,

⁶ Ibid., 360-361.

depending on whether the context is art and beauty, chemistry, whether or not an event happened in history, knowledge that God is real, and so forth.

Skill is know-how based on knowledge. In fact, wisdom may fairly be defined as skill regarding how to live life well. So understood, it follows that one can have knowledge without wisdom but not vice versa. This is important, because so many today wrongly divorce wisdom from knowledge.

To sum up, our interpretations, beliefs, worldview, ultimate presuppositions do, indeed, *affect* what we see, but they do not determine what we see nor do they stand between us and reality. By virtue of direct awareness of reality, we can correct, confirm, or disconfirm all these things. And we do not start thinking from our presuppositions. We start “thinking” from experience that we use to choose among an alternative set of assumptions as to which explains things better and corresponds most accurately with what we directly experience, within and beyond the bounds of the five senses. Yes, Virginia, there is a real world, and far from being glasses through which we (actually fail to) see that world, a worldview directs our attention and thereby we make direct contact with things themselves. The worldview that best explains the world is the one that best interprets the world in a way that comports with our interpretive-independent direct access to that world. And that worldview is nothing other than a Christian worldview.⁷

⁷ I want to thank my friend and colleague, Joe Gorra, for his helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. I also am indebted to Professor Scott Smith for hours of conversation about these matters.